

# Death of the Combatant Command?

## Toward a Joint Interagency Approach

By JEFFREY BUCHANAN, MAXIE Y. DAVIS, and LEE T. WIGHT

*In the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns, one of the most important lessons . . . relearned is that military success is not sufficient. . . . These so-called soft capabilities along with military power are indispensable to any lasting success, indeed, to victory itself as Clausewitz understood it, which is achieving a political objective.*

—Robert M. Gates,  
Secretary of Defense<sup>1</sup>

**H**indsight is often 20/20. We can study our efforts in Vietnam, the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, and even the current situations in Afghanistan and Iraq and come to some fundamental conclusions. One is that our interagency process is broken.<sup>2</sup> Why is that? If it is broken, can we fix it? In this article, we explore the problems with our current interagency process,<sup>3</sup> suggest a solution, compare that with other possible solution sets, and discuss consequences of its implementation.

The problems with the American interagency process are complex. We do not pretend to be experts on the current process or historians recounting each incremental step along our path to the present. We do believe, however, that most of today's prob-

lems arise from a gap created by a lack of either capacity or integration, or both, below the national level. This article proposes filling that vacuum with standing, civilian-led interagency organizations, having regional responsibility for all aspects of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

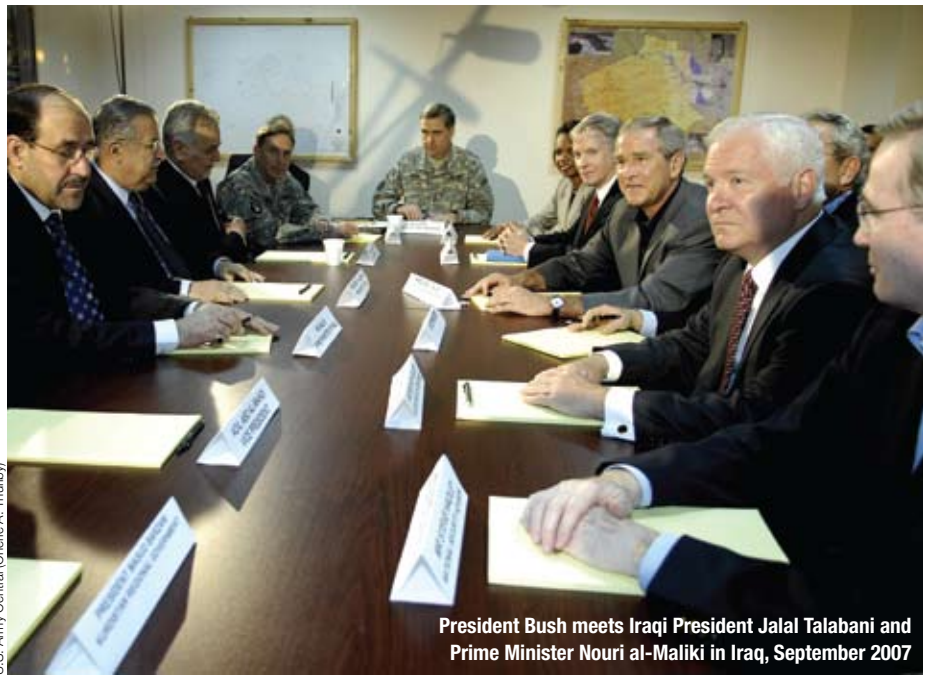
Thomas Ricks posits that the decision to give the Department of Defense (DOD) the lead for postwar Iraq was problematic and may have doomed the American effort from the start, since the department lacked the capabilities to oversee a large multiagency civilian mission.<sup>5</sup> If so, then why did DOD get the lead for postwar Iraq? A possible answer is that although DOD may not have had all that it needed at the outset of the war, there was no other government institution that had the budget or manpower to manage the effort.<sup>6</sup>

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While history will judge how well DOD lived up to those postwar Iraq challenges, it seems evident now that an agency responsible for one of the instruments of power should not be responsible for integrating the efforts of all the others. At the national level, that integration is supposed to occur from within the National Security Council (NSC). The NSC advises the President, decisions are made, and the instruments of power are integrated toward our national interests. In response, the various agencies march forward to do their respective parts. Below the national level, integration is problematic. At the regional or operational level, a coherent blend of the instruments of power is dependent on cooperation.<sup>7</sup>

It seems logical that if true integration only occurs at the national level, execution at the regional or local levels could be fraught with problems, as the agencies representing the instruments of power are organized differently and there is no directive authority for implementation at the regional level. DOD is organized with six geographic combatant commands responsible for the various regions, but the Department of State regional organization is different. State also has six regional bureaus, but the boundaries do not match those of DOD. As an example, the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) commander must coordinate efforts with three regional State bureaus: African Affairs, Near Eastern Affairs, and South and Central Asian Affairs. The State bureau system is also relatively new, as the traditional approach to coordination has been at the Ambassador/Country Team level. The result is that the combatant commander must coordinate efforts with three Assistant Secretaries of State (leaders of State regional bureaus) and 27 Country Teams. Conversely, the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs must coordinate with three combatant commanders: those of USCENTCOM, U.S. European Command (USEUCOM), and U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM).

Integration of the informational and economic instruments of power is also problematic at the regional level. The U.S. Information Agency morphed into the Department of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs as part of the State Department. Similar to the



U.S. Army Central (Cherie A. Thurbill)

President Bush meets Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq, September 2007

move to appoint the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) concurrently as the Director of Foreign Assistance (a Deputy Secretary of State), the change was an attempt to better integrate efforts at the national level, but no comparable regional level structure exists. A further complication is apparent when we consider that much of our national structure evolved only to consider domestic U.S. problems. Many organizations outside DOD and State consequently did not develop an expeditionary capacity and are not structured to meet foreign demands.

### Band-aids on a Sucking Chest Wound

Spurred by recent experience, gaining unity of effort within the interagency realm has galvanized so much debate that possible solutions are blooming from almost every think tank and military academic institution. While space prevents addressing each individually, these proffered solutions fall into three basic groups, running the gamut from legislative actions that restructure or add more agencies outside of DOD, to modifications to existing combatant command staffs, to a proposal that recommends completely replacing three of the regional command staffs with hybrid organizations.

A prevalent academic argument is that the flaws in the interagency process can be legislatively remedied by creating additional organizations to coordinate the efforts of existing agencies, citing as a prime example the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 as the fix for poor coordination and communication among the military Services. Nora Bensahel and Anne Moisan embrace this legislative premise and propose an accompanying organizational construct.<sup>8</sup> Their approach includes shoring up the NSC leadership role by establishing a Prevention, Reconstruction, and Stabilization Cell (PRSC) within the NSC. The PRSC would absorb the State Department Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) to create a “flat” organization with 10 to 15 permanent members that would have directive authority over supporting interagency (excluding DOD) departments in policy development, strategic planning, execution of crisis management, and conflict and postconflict operations.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, this proposal appears to be no more than a “super” S/CRS and presents many of the same issues as the original S/CRS. These challenges include ambiguous and omitted lines of authority between military and civilian authorities, insufficient capacity to execute its responsibilities (specifically, no expeditionary capability), and possible lack of political support.

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Another legislative solution is the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) model, which creates offices in each of the key civilian agencies to participate in the interagency planning process. These offices would meet quarterly with DOD and other agencies under NSC-chaired summits to coordinate their planning efforts. Similarly, the Defense Science Board (DSB) would create cross-government contingency planning and integration task forces for countries “ripe and important” under the leadership and direction of the President and NSC.<sup>10</sup> Not only do these models share the lack of deployable resources and ambiguous lines of authority inherent in the S/CRS and PRSC, but they also fail to provide continuous and collective oversight for the complex and global range of U.S. concerns. Moreover, they do not have directive authority to integrate with military planning efforts.

The Marine Forces Pacific Crisis Management Group (CMG) model takes a step beyond the limited planning role of the CSIS and DSB by creating a full-time standing organization to support crisis prevention and response and provide a cohesive transition from Defense to State while executing stability and recovery operations.<sup>11</sup> While certainly a step in the right direction, it adds another level of bureaucracy between the NSC and DOD/State (and correspondingly creates a competing demand for resources and personnel from other agencies) and still lacks directive authority over DOD or State actions.

Turning from the “legislatively added” organizations, there is a group of proposals, summarized by Neyla Arnas, Charles Barry, and Robert Oakley, that aims to restructure the current geographic combatant command staffs to include elements of the interagency milieu. These include the Full Spectrum Joint Interagency Coordination Group (JIACG) Concept, Super Political Advisor (POLAD), J-10, and Defense Advisor proposals.

Although the individual details differ, they all add a number of interagency advisors of varying capabilities to the combatant command staff. The most far-reaching of these staff reorganizations is that of the nascent USAFRICOM staff, which proposes a fully integrated military and non-DOD civilian interagency staff. These civilian representatives would not merely advise, but would be full-fledged members of the staff. Despite the appealingly fresh approach to staff composition, the Achilles’ heel of all of

these constructs remains that the interagency representatives, whether advisors or staff, lack directive authority over their parent organizations. While any of these models would undoubtedly improve planning by broadening staff expertise, under the crucible of combat or bureaucratic pressures, they cannot compel interagency compliance with the resulting plan—no matter how comprehensive. Another drawback is that all of these proposals weight the combatant command inordinately heavily in the regional planning process. This unbalanced approach may militarize U.S. foreign policy, which, some fear, risks creating modern-day proconsuls.<sup>12</sup>

Significantly, the final alternative, conceived by James Carafano, proposes replacing the existing Unified Command Plan (UCP) with the U.S. Engagement Plan (U.S.-Plan). It would reduce the number of combatant commands to three and reorganize their boundaries and responsibilities. The U.S.-Plan would establish three Joint Interagency Groups (InterGroups) responsible for Latin America, Africa–Middle East, and Central and South Asia. Each InterGroup would have a military staff as the nucleus of a standing joint task force (JTF) in the event of military operations. Also, the InterGroup proposes a *flexible* command structure that defines operational leadership—be it civilian or military—by the nature of the task performed.<sup>13</sup>

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This concept has substantial merit. In fact, our most significant critique is that it does not go far enough. Having only approximately a third of U.S. global interests served by this multidisciplinary organization begs the question of how crises would be managed elsewhere and why risk should be assumed in those regions lacking InterGroups. In addition, one can argue that the regions Carafano offers for combatant commanders and his proposed InterGroups are too vast, and the regional issues too varied and complex, for this small grouping to manage. This argument appears to have been validated by creating USAFRICOM to manage issues that exceeded the capacities of existing USCEN-

COM and USEUCOM staffs. Carafano also does not specify how the InterGroups would relate to the NSC, State, Ambassadors, DOD, or other combatant commands (are they peers or superiors?). Moreover, he does not specify who would lead such a nontraditional organization. While “fluidity of leadership” may be an asset in operations that transition smoothly between phases in a linear fashion, many contemporary stabilization operations can suddenly shift between combat and nationbuilding, while some scenarios may require simultaneous actions on multiple priorities. Any confusion that delays appropriate response in such a situation could prove fatal. Despite its drawbacks, the InterGroup concept has significant merit.

### Breaking the Rice Bowls

As the review above should illustrate, the world has changed since 1947, and indeed, even since Goldwater-Nichols reorganized the U.S. military Services’ relationships. The Cold War is long over, nonstate actors dominate international conflict, DOD has transformed and become the dominant arm of foreign policy, and the Department of State has withered and atrophied.<sup>14</sup> Today’s combat environments—often with a significant nationbuilding component—are replete with entities and organizations besides the military. Unfortunately, our governmental structure has not concomitantly changed.

The absence of change does not appear to be due to a paucity of ideas, yet all proposals so far appear to share the common flaw of lacking true directive authority to integrate interagency operations.<sup>15</sup> This is a task that the military has no authority to perform, yet current practice has effectively made DOD responsible for its success. This flies in the face of State Department responsibilities and risks militarizing America’s foreign policy.<sup>16</sup>

As noted at the outset, this article proposes standing, civilian-led interagency organizations, with regional responsibility for all aspects of U.S. foreign policy, reporting directly to the President through the NSC.<sup>17</sup> These entities’ formal structure would include representatives from all major Federal Government agencies, including DOD, while dissolving the existing geographic combatant commands.<sup>18</sup> These organizations would be led by highly credentialed civilians, potentially with a four-star military deputy. Their charter would include true directive authority to all agencies below the NSC, as it would relate to activities



occurring in the assigned region—to include U.S. Ambassadors and Country Teams.<sup>19</sup>

The NSC would be responsible for integrating policy among these regional entities and proposing solutions to the President for intractable resource or mission conflicts. In addition to representatives and staffs of other agencies, these organizations would have assigned joint military forces, tailored to the regional missions and augmented as necessary in times of crisis. This construct would change only the authority to integrate the instruments of national power at the operational level. It would not change Title 10 military administrative command responsibility, which would continue to run from the President through the Secretary of Defense to the senior ranking military officer in the new organization. Given the joint nature of forces assigned, as well as the inherent interagency structure with both interagency directive and military command authority, we propose naming these organizations Joint Interagency Commands (JIACOMs).

The result would be an operational-level organization responsible for planning, integrating, and executing all U.S. regional foreign policy. It would contain or have direct access to and tasking authority over all U.S. agencies likely to be involved in planning and implementing these policies, up to and including the use of military force. This structure would exist permanently, whether or not contingency operations were under way. Finally, where the JIACOM interfaces at the strategic level through the NSC, it would interface with operational-tactical level activities by standing up joint interagency task forces (JIATFs) that would have the lead for local crisis management, just as combatant commands may currently elect to stand up JTFs.<sup>20</sup>

### Answering the “So What?”

The first question one might ask is if the formation of JIACOMs would even be feasible. The answer is a resounding *maybe*—and it would be hard to bring about. In the first place, the changes necessary to form JIACOMs would require significant cooperation and action from both the executive and legislative branches of government. The need for reform in our interagency process is critical and Congress must play a central role:

*It is unrealistic to expect the executive branch to reform itself. Administrations are too busy with day to day operations to*

*see the need for change and presidential directives are insufficient and ineffective for this level of reform . . . [which] must be driven by Congress, in a manner similar to that achieved by the Goldwater-Nichols Act in 1986. . . . While Congress is part of the solution it is also part of the problem and requires similar reform of its own.*<sup>21</sup>

JIACOMs are feasible only through a new National Security Act and revision to Title 10, the UCP, and various Presidential decision directives, among other documents. Funding

of responsibility is that we are forced to work across boundaries at the *regional* level. If we ensured that all elements of power were regionally integrated through the formation of JIACOMs, the burden for strategic level integration at the NSC may increase.

A second concern is a potential loss of the balance of power at the regional level. The Founding Fathers established three branches of government to ensure checks and balances. One could argue that the healthy tension between DOD and State at the regional level maintains that balance. Directive authority at

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would certainly require significant attention. At the minimum, the “non-DOD” portion of the JIACOMs must be adequately resourced to meet regional integration challenges.

As with any sea change, the formation of JIACOMs would likely carry both costs and benefits. Aside from the necessary changes in structure, authorities, and funding, the development of JIACOMs could create three new concerns. The first is a potential loss of integration among the regions. One advantage we currently enjoy with inconsistent combatant command and State bureau areas

the regional level equates to unity of command rather than merely unity of effort, so we run the risk of poor direction through a lack of internal criticism. However, this potential cost could be mitigated through sound leadership.

Such is also the case for the final concern: dealing with organizational culture. The various members of the JIACOMs would each be creatures of their parent organizations’ culture. The potential for organizational conflict would be high. The JIACOM leadership must find a way to embrace each organization’s culture and draw out the benefits

California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger (left) leads interagency team during response to wildfires, July 2008



DOD (Steven J. Weber)

from membership rather than allowing seeds of conflict to foment internal strife.

The formation of JIACOMs would clearly generate significant benefits, as well as costs. The major potential benefit is a significant increase in unity of effort across all the instruments of national power, through all phases of operations.<sup>22</sup> In addition to better geographical integration, we would also enjoy better chronological integration. A second potential benefit is the increased professional development of JIACOM members. In addition to providing an enhanced career path for our most experienced military and civilian leaders, we would likely see better development of regional expertise in the JIACOM staff. Both DOD and State currently have significant developmental programs, but JIACOMs would force more robust experience overall.

A third potential benefit is that JIACOMs may facilitate both coalition and alliance-based operations from a political standpoint. It may be more palatable for some nations to accept working with a civilian-led organization rather than a purely military one. Similarly, we may see a significant increase in participation of the other non-military ministries of a contributing nation. One could also postulate that the civilian-led JIACOM would appear less threatening to many NGOs and intergovernmental organizations; therefore, we might expect better international and private integration. Likewise, few could construe a civilian JIACOM leader as a provocative proconsul.

Recent experience may be the slap that refocuses our perception of previous postconflict experiences. Regardless of perspective, today's reality should not be ignored. Our interagency process is dangerously dysfunctional. Bipartisan pundits are charging headlong with possible solutions, but all appear fatally flawed from inception.

Existing proposals either increase bureaucratic complexity or fail to proscribe true directive authority that would force the integration of myriad agencies wielding national power. Other suggestions merely add weight to an already bloated combatant command staff and risk DOD drowning the foreign policy voice of State. Although a definite break from traditional thought, the JIACOM concept may address these concerns. It does require sweeping governmental change and a willingness to shatter paradigms, but with a new Presidential administration—and

while the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan are still fresh—it may be time for the death of the geographic combatant command as we know it. Instead of dissipating our peerless, precious national energies through lack of focus, we have the opportunity to harness all elements of national power through a Joint Interagency Command and truly labor as one. **JFQ**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert M. Gates, remarks delivered to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, January 26, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Nora Bensahel and Anne M. Moisan, "Repairing the Interagency Process," *Joint Force Quarterly* 44 (1st Quarter 2007), 106–108, available at <[www.ndu.edu/inss/Press/jfq\\_pages/editions/i44/30.pdf](http://www.ndu.edu/inss/Press/jfq_pages/editions/i44/30.pdf)>.

<sup>3</sup> For purposes of this article, the term *interagency* includes those from the Departments of State, Treasury, Justice, Transportation, and all others as detailed in Joint Publication (JP) 3–08, *Interagency, Intergovernmental Organization, and Nongovernmental Coordination During Joint Operations*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, March 2006), but will exclude those from the Department of Defense (DOD), although the authors recognize that DOD is itself an agency and would by other definitions be included in that term. Examples of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) include the United Nations, World Health Organization, Red Cross, and Red Crescent (among others), while nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) include Doctors Without Borders, CARE, and so forth.

<sup>4</sup> JP 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, May 14, 2007), I–15. In addition to the plethora of interagency actions, this proposal includes the entire range of military operations, such as force protection—which requires significant cooperation from agencies external to DOD.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 78–79. Ricks is citing an unpublished RAND Corporation study faxed to the Secretary of Defense on February 8, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Gates.

<sup>7</sup> As noted in JP 3–08, military operations must be strategically integrated and operationally and tactically coordinated with the activities of other agencies of the U.S. Government, IGOs, NGOs, regional organizations, the operations of foreign forces, and activities of various host nation agencies. Sometimes the joint force commander (JFC) draws on the capabilities of other organizations; sometimes the JFC provides capabilities to other organizations; and sometimes the JFC merely deconflicts his activities with those of others.

<sup>8</sup> Bensahel and Moisan.

<sup>9</sup> Neyla Arnas, Charles Barry, and Robert B. Oakley, *Harnessing the Interagency for Complex Operations*, Defense and Technology Paper 16 (Washington, DC: Center for Technology and National Security Policy, August 2005), 7, available at <[www.ndu.edu/ctnsp/Def\\_Tech/DTP%2016%20Harnessing%20the%20Interagency.pdf](http://www.ndu.edu/ctnsp/Def_Tech/DTP%2016%20Harnessing%20the%20Interagency.pdf)>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 16. Note that the name reflects only the Service sponsoring this research. The Marine Corps would not "manage" this group.

<sup>12</sup> See the extensive critique of the current out-of-balance relationship in terms of resources, personnel, and authority between DOD and State in Howard D. Belote, "Proconsuls, Pretenders, or Professionals? The Political Role of Regional Combatant Commanders," *Essays 2004: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Strategy Essay Competition* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> James Jay Carafano, "Herding Cats: Understanding Why Government Agencies Don't Cooperate and How to Fix the Problem," *Heritage Lectures* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, July 2006), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Richard H. Kohn, "The Erosion of Civilian Control of the Military in the United States Today," *Naval War College Review* (Summer 2002), 9; and Kenneth R. Dahl, "New Security for New Threats: The Case for Reforming the Interagency Process," unpublished manuscript, The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, July 2007, 15, available at <[www.brookings.edu/papers/2007/07defense\\_dahl.aspx?rssid=executive%20branch](http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2007/07defense_dahl.aspx?rssid=executive%20branch)>.

<sup>15</sup> Carafano, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Belote, 1.

<sup>17</sup> JP 1, I–15. This proposal would include the entire range of military operations.

<sup>18</sup> Note that the functional combatant commands (U.S. Joint Forces Command, U.S. Special Operations Command, U.S. Strategic Command, and U.S. Transportation Command) remain in this construct, but their assigned forces would be employed by and integrated through our proposed new structure. At some point, however, the responsibilities and indeed the very existence of the functional combatant commands may similarly be revised. All existing regional boundaries would need to be reassessed and standardized among U.S. Government agencies.

<sup>19</sup> Authority would be given by either law or Presidential decree. Obviously, this would require changes to existing U.S. Code, Title 10, the Unified Command Plan, and a host of joint and Service doctrinal documents.

<sup>20</sup> Note that these joint interagency task forces would report to their "parent" Joint Interagency Command, similar to a joint task force reporting to a combatant command in the current structure.

<sup>21</sup> Dahl, 4.

<sup>22</sup> JP 1, I–8–22.